

THE INN OF SAN JACINTO.

BY ZOE DANA UNDERHILL.

YOU ask me if I believe in ghosts. Of course I do. I believe in them because I have felt one. It was in a ruin, too, the correct place for ghosts; but not exactly in the right kind of ruin, for there was nothing imposing or weird about it; it was a dusty, tumble-down adobe shanty in New Mexico.

Do you remember Harry Felters—what great promise he gave as a young artist, and how he never came to anything? He and I were great chums at the Art School, and afterwards we fell into the way of going on sketching tours together. He was a nice fellow, quick-tempered, but very good-natured too, and it would have been hard to find a jollier companion. I was delighted one autumn when he proposed we should make a little Western excursion together; he wanted to get some of the atmospheric effects on the high plains. We started in September, bought ourselves a couple of broncos when we reached the country we wanted, and started off on the trail which ran near the railroad. We had splendid weather, took all the time we wanted, and got a lot of first-rate things; but Felters was looking forward all the time to stopping at a little Mexican village—San Jacinto, the name was—which lay some distance off the main trail, but which he had heard was the rarest place. A friend of his had been there a couple of years before, but had only been able to stay a day or so. He reported a tolerable inn, and we planned to stop for several weeks, making excursions into the surrounding country, and getting what we were particularly anxious for—some character sketches of the

native. We had the pleasantest anticipations of our time there.

The day before we expected to reach San Jacinto we struck off on to a side trail across the hills. We learned afterwards that there was more danger in undertaking this lonely journey than we had any idea of at the time, but we came to no harm. We slept out that night, and late the next afternoon we came in sight of the village, perched half-way up a long sloping mesa. We reached it as the sun was setting. There was but a single street running between low adobe huts, but, to our surprise, this street was thronged with Mexicans and Indians in holiday costume—fierce, agile-looking fellows in thumping hats, and slim girls with mantillas over their heads.

We mustered our slender stock of Spanish, and inquired of the first group we met the reason of the crowd. We found some local fair was in progress, and it was not only the inhabitants of San Jacinto we beheld, but of all the settlements for fifty miles around. Harry, in the seventh heaven of delight, was gaping at all the wrinkled old men and dark-eyed girls, in their picturesque array, but I was hungry, and not willing to waste time on the picturesque just then, so I hauled him along, protesting and turning round all the time, towards what had been pointed out to us as the inn we were in search of. It stood quite at the other end of the street, and looked bigger and more imposing than the rest of the houses, being newly painted a fine brick-color.

"Here we are at last, and a good thing

too," said I, as the owner of the house came bustling out to receive us. He hurried us into a long, crowded room, and set a couple of cooling drinks before us in enormous glasses before we had time to speak, chattering all the time with great civility. But as soon as we began to talk of rooms he sang a different tune.

"Ah, señors," he cried, in a despairing tone, "that is an impossibility, quite an impossibility. Every inch of room in the house is taken—is crowded, I may say. As soon as they are done drinking and singing we put mattresses down on the floor of the eating-room here, and I will try my best to find a corner for a mattress for the two noble gentlemen. Mattresses in plenty I have, but no space to spread them, unfortunately."

"Well, well," broke in Harry, "it isn't mattresses we want. It's a room to ourselves to sleep in. Surely we can find something at some of the neighbors'. We won't grumble if it's a little one."

But the landlord shook his head. "No, no," he reiterated; "there isn't an empty space anywhere in the village big enough to hold a canary-bird. Every house is full."

"But you must have some little corner or cupboard you could put us in. Your own room, for instance. If we pay you well, couldn't you move out of that for a night or two, just till this fair is over?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't slept in my own room for three nights. Seven women have it," he said. "I take one of the benches down here."

"Very well," cried Harry, who was getting out of temper; "then we will simply go on without stopping. We meant to spend several weeks here, but of course if you haven't accommodations—" And he turned and picked up his saddle-bags from the bench where he had flung them.

"Oh, come, now, Harry," said I, "we don't want to leave the moment we get here. For a few nights we can certainly stand it, and then it will quiet down again."

"Yes, yes," cried the landlord, evidently much impressed to hear of the long stay we had intended, and anxious to detain us if promises would do it; "oh, yes, yes! By the end of the week the fair is over, and then you can have splendid rooms—as many rooms as you like."

But, you know, Harry was always a pig-headed fellow. He buckled his bags tight.

"No," said he; "I'm not going to sleep in any such mess as this. If we can't have rooms to ourselves, we go on to-night. That's all about it."

The landlord wrung his hands. "Ah," he cried, "what a shame! what a shame! To have the gentlemen leave my house!" Then I saw a sly gleam come into his eye. "Ah," he cried, "I have it! I have it! If the gentlemen would only be satisfied. Do you mind, perhaps, if you sleep in a very old room? Oh, very, very old!"

"No, no!" we interposed, in a breath.

"But it is very old," he went on, looking at us narrowly, "and there is but the one room for the two."

"That is nothing," we cried. "We won't mind that in the least, as long as we don't have to sleep on the floor with strangers."

"And even there," he went on, "I fear you would have to occupy the same bed; there is but one bedstead in the room. To be sure," he said, reflectively, "one of you might have a mattress on the floor even there, but it would be very cold, I fear. The floor is of stone, and the dampness—"

"Oh, never mind," we interrupted; "for three or four nights it won't matter, as long as we can have the room to ourselves."

"Certainly, certainly," he reiterated, "to yourselves. I should not think of putting any one else in the room of the two noble gentlemen. Sit down, sit down, and make yourselves easy. I will send my niece to make ready for you. You must not expect too much, gentlemen. It is in the old part of the house that has gone to ruin a good deal; that is why I never thought of it before. But this one room is strongly built. It is safe enough; you need have no fear of roof or walls. But it is dusty; I must have it swept." And so talking on, half to himself and half to us, he filled our glasses again, and got himself out of the room. Presently we heard his voice outside calling, "Julita! Julita!" and then a long and rather vehement whispered conversation was carried on not far from the window.

It was an hour or more, and we had finished our supper, before he returned to show us to our apartment. We found it was in a deserted building whose presence we had not even suspected from the front

of the house. It lay far to the back and one side, and was, our host told us, the old original inn, which had been built by his great-uncle several times removed, and had fallen too much out of repair to use. But the room to which he led us was still in tolerable preservation, a queer old place, with walls and floor of rough stone, and lighted by a small grated window high up at one side. They had set in a few odd pieces of furniture for us, and a big four-post bedstead, which looked as old as the room, was piled high with an enormous feather bed. For the bedstead our host apologized profusely. Not to be able to furnish us at least with separate sleeping accommodations weighed heavily on his spirits. But what could he do? It was to be regarded as good fortune that the old bedstead had not long since been brought into the house and given to earlier comers. Its age and weight were the sole reasons it was still at our disposal. For the feather bed he did not think it necessary to apologize, though that was certainly what seemed most formidable to us. However, we were pleased enough to get anything to ourselves, and told him so.

We went back to the big hall, and sat there awhile smoking and watching the queer collection of humanity it held, but we were both tired with our ride, and presently asked the landlord for our candles. He brought them, one for each, and each with a little box of Swedish matches beside it on the candlestick. But he was a long time lighting them, snuffed them out once or twice, and finally said, with a curious air of gravity for so slight a speech:

"The gentlemen see that our candles are not easy to light. Might I beg of them to leave the night-light burning in their chamber?"

"Night-light?" cried Harry, brusquely. "Oh no, we don't want a night-light. There is nothing the matter with those candles. It's only the clumsy way you snuffed them." And with the word he drew a match from his pocket, lit it quickly, and in a moment had the candle burning clearly.

The landlord looked perturbed. "See! see!" he cried. "Once the candle may light quickly, and another time it may not. The little light will not disturb you. I beg the gentlemen will leave it burning. There will be no extra charge—

none whatever." And he looked at us anxiously.

"Oh, nonsense!" said Harry, turning away with his candle.

But the landlord must have thought I was of a more accommodating disposition, for now he caught me by the coat sleeve. "I beg, I beg," he repeated; and, tired of his persistence, I answered, carelessly, "Oh, all right; I won't put it out," and left before he had time to say anything more.

But we were not yet free from importunities about our lights, for as we passed the kitchen his fat old wife, who superintended the cooking for her husband's guests, waddled towards us.

"Candles! candles!" she panted. "Oh, they're no good. You'll blow them out before you think twice. But look out not to disturb the little night-light Julita set up in the niche. That'll give you light enough to see by all night."

"Good Lord! what do we want to see for? The night's made for sleeping," cried Harry, roughly, and dragged me through the kitchen like a whirlwind, while behind us we still heard the wheezing voice of the old woman discoursing on the insufficiency of candles and the superior advantages of Julita's oil-taper.

We had not done with the advocates of the night-light even yet. As we made our way through the dusty passage, stumbling over the broken slabs of stone which formed its floor, we encountered Julita herself, pale and trembling, and regarding with anxious fear the lantern which she held in her hand. She jumped aside with a scream when she caught sight of us, then laid her hand on her heart with a look of relief.

"Oh, blessed saints, it is the gentlemen!" she exclaimed. "I have just been to look after the light in your room myself." She spoke as one conscious of having bestowed an inestimable favor. "It is burning brightly. The little oil-lamp is high up in the niche of the wall; nothing can overturn it. The oil is of the best. It will burn all night—"

"Oh, come!" cried Harry, who by this time had entirely lost his temper. "Who wants your infernal lamp? For Heaven's sake, let us have a little peace and darkness."

"Ah, no, no!" cried the girl, recoiling as if he had struck her—"not darkness! The gracious gentleman did not think of

what he was saying. Oh, sir," laying her hand on my arm as Harry pushed angrily past her, "you surely would not put out the light? You will surely let it burn all night?" and she looked at me as desperately as if she were imploring me not to cut my throat. Her eyes were full of tears. I felt sorry for such distress, even while I was annoyed by these continuous appeals from a singularly light-loving populace, and answered, hastily,

"Oh, certainly, certainly, my good girl." Slipping past her, I contrived to get into the room and shut the door before she could speak again.

Harry came up and locked it.

"Confound them!" he said; "what is the matter with them all? We have matches, I hope. Why should they take such a particularly fervent interest in our lamp?" and he laid his match-box on the chair at the head of the ponderous bedstead, beside the candle which he had just extinguished.

Then he reached up and blew out the little flame in the niche above our heads.

"There!" said he; "I hope that's done with for to-night, anyway."

"Oh, Harry," I remonstrated, "I told the girl I wouldn't put it out."

"Well, you haven't, have you?" he rejoined, roughly. "Now you'd better not talk any more of that intolerable nonsense, or I shall get into a temper. Put out your own light when you're ready to go to sleep, and that's the end of it. I'm tired to death."

It wasn't five minutes before he had tumbled into the wide bed, nor five more before he was asleep. I felt wakeful, and made my preparations in a more leisurely way, but presently I too stretched out my weary limbs on the soft feathers. The little window with its iron bars stood diagonally across from the foot of the bed, and as I blew out my candle and sank back on the pillow my eyes fell on the dim gray square. I seemed to see some vague black form pass between me and it. My heart gave a sudden throb, and I started to raise myself; but before I had done so I felt in the darkness something fly at my throat. My hands went up instinctively, and grasped the thick cold fingers which were clutching me so tightly that it was impossible to breathe. The terror of death fell upon me, and with all my strength I tore at the invisible hands which were squeezing my life

out, but I could no more move them than I could have moved the solid rock. I was powerless to make a sound. I set my head and shoulders against the bulk which pressed upon me and tried to push it back, but vainly, though in my agony I writhed and twisted like a snake. I felt that I was growing faint, my head rang, and my senses were faltering, when in my convulsive movements my foot touched Harry's warm and sleeping body. I gathered myself together, and struck out with all the strength I had left. I felt him roll over, and then that he was sitting up in bed. It was like heaven to know that he was beside me and roused, but even then I thought to myself there was little chance of his coming to my rescue in time.

Harry called to me once or twice, and then I felt his hand laid on my heaving shoulder. The next moment I heard him jump out of bed, and it seemed not a second before the flare of a candle lit up the room. The pressure was gone from my throat. I drew in the air again and yet again, but was still too exhausted and bewildered to know anything but that the struggle was over, and I was once more drawing the blessed breath of life.

"Good gracious! What's the matter with you?" I heard Harry say; but I only moaned.

"Here, wake up!" he cried, and shook me by the shoulder. I lifted myself on one elbow, and looked around with a shudder. There was nothing in sight but Harry, who was looking at me sharply. I put my hand to my throat; it was bruised and sore to the touch.

"Oh, Harry," I panted, "something awful has happened!"

"Something awful!" he repeated. "You've had an awful nightmare, that's what's the matter—and you aren't awake yet, either. Shake yourself together, man, can't you? You look as if you'd seen a ghost. I declare your eyes are all blood-shot. Oh, nonsense!" as I slipped back on the pillow, with a sigh. "Come, brace up, and have a little style about you."

"Oh, Harry," I reiterated, "there has been something awful. It's no nightmare. I wasn't asleep. The minute the light was out some one—something—came at my throat. In another moment I should have been strangled, if you hadn't waked."

"Why, I didn't do anything, except

jump out of bed when you kicked me. You needn't thank me for anything more than waking you up—and that isn't half done yet."

"Oh, I'm awake enough!" I cried.

"Well, then," said he, "that's all there is to be said about it. We'll blow out the light and try our hand at sleeping again," and as he spoke he bent over the candle to extinguish it; but I caught him and pulled him away quickly.

"No, no!" I shouted, filled with uncontrollable terror; "let it burn. Light the little night-lamp, won't you? I've had such a scare I'm afraid to be left in the dark."

"All right," he answered, with a laugh; "we'll keep the promise to Julita the rest of the night, anyway. I suppose it was your uneasy conscience wouldn't let you rest."

In a few moments more he was again sound asleep beside me, but my fears were not so easily quieted. A hundred imaginary noises made me start up to peer into the distant corners of the room, or look up at the black square of the window; and at every little quiver of the tiny flame burning in the niche my heart jumped. I lay awake till the dawn came in at the grated casement, and then fell asleep, utterly worn out.

Harry was moving about the room, humming a song, when I woke. The bright sun was shining through the bars of the window. I felt ashamed of myself, and when he caught my eye he broke into a roar of laughter.

"Well, I say," he shouted, "I hope you've managed to pluck up a little spirit this morning. I never saw a man scared so blue in my life. For Heaven's sake, tell us what you were dreaming about. A whole menagerie, I should say. How's your neck this morning?" And he went off into a fresh peal of laughter.

"Well, laugh if you like," said I; "it was awful. I can't imagine how I came to get into such a state. Good heavens! I can't bear to think of it even now." I paused a moment, for as the memory of the night's grisly phantom came back clearly, an intolerable shiver of fear went through me. "Besides," I went on, "my neck is all sore still. I believe you can see the bruises."

"By Jove!" he said, coming up and looking at me closely. "By Jove!" he repeated, touching my throat gingerly with

the tips of his fingers. "That's the most curious thing I ever saw! You're all black and blue! How *did* you do it?"

"That's more than I know," said I, "unless the thing that came at me last night did it." And then I told him every detail of my curious experience of the night. As I told it my own faith in its reality grew, and I could see that he was impressed with the same feeling; but when I came to the end he shook himself, seemed to gather his routed forces, and gave an incredulous laugh again.

"Well," he said, looking down at me from his great height—"well, that certainly is a queer story. And you think all that could go on with me asleep right beside you and me not know it? Eh? Oh, nonsense! You had a nightmare, of course, and that's what made you kick out so. My shins are as black and blue as your neck."

"Yes, and what made my neck black and blue?" I broke in. "Do you suppose you had the nightmare too, and were trying to twist it?"

"No, no! Of course not," said he. "You must have twisted your own fingers around it in your sleep somehow. That isn't so unlikely as that a phantom tried to throttle you." And he gave anew a boisterous laugh.

There was no use in arguing with him; and besides, I had no tenable ground for argument. I could not bring myself to believe in his explanation; but still less could I, in the full light of reason and glare of day, believe in the unseen foe who had made the darkness of night so horrible. With an effort I succeeded in dismissing the whole thing from my mind, and dressed to join Harry in the sketching excursion which we had planned the day before. Julita was in the passage as we went through to breakfast. She did not seem busy about anything, and by her attitude I judged she had been watching our door. At any rate, as we opened it her face was pale and troubled, but a moment later broke into smiles as she saw us both emerge from the room. The landlord, too, greeted us with fervor, and served us an excellent breakfast, which his fat wife came in to watch us eat. Indeed, every one about the inn seemed to take an interest in us, and gathered in the doorways to look at us. This we attributed to the fact that we were, in a way, foreigners; and they were all so good-

natured about it, breaking out into smiles and expressions of satisfaction whenever we looked their way, that we did not mind.

We had a successful day of it, gathering in a collection of queer and picturesque figures, and didn't get back till dark. I had felt strangely tired all day, and was glad to yield to Harry's suggestion that we should go early to bed. He stuck his sketches all around, and gloated over them in the dim illumination of the candles; but I was overcome with sleep, and tumbled into bed as quickly as I could.

"I'll get on the other side, Harry," I said, "if you aren't ready to come yet."

"All right, old man," said he, walking back and forth before his pictures. "I'm not ready yet. I hope this light won't keep you awake."

"On the contrary," said I, "I much prefer it. I can't forget my bad dreams so quickly. Do leave the little night-light burning, Harry, like a good fellow."

"All right," he answered; and in a moment I was asleep.

I don't know how long afterwards it was that I was wakened abruptly by being pushed almost out of bed. I was so sound asleep that I could not collect my thoughts all at once, and lay for a moment trying to rouse myself, when the blow was violently repeated, and then I became aware that Harry was writhing and beating his arms about at my side. In a sudden spasm of terror I sprang out of bed, ran round to the other side where the matches were, and struck the whole bunch as I gathered them in my hand. They flared up, and shivering with fright, I moved to the bedside. There lay Harry, his eyes staring wide with horror, and drawing occasionally a long moaning breath. I knew well enough what it was, and wasted no time on questions, but hurried to light the candle before the matches should go out. Then, for safety, I also reached up and kindled the little taper, which Harry had evidently extinguished, as the oil in the glass was scarcely consumed. Afterwards I turned back to Harry, drew the covers away to give him air, carried the light to the foot of the bed, where his eyes could rest upon it, and draw from it the reassurance that I knew nothing else could give, and softly chafed his nerveless hands. Presently I had the satisfaction of seeing the

wild and wandering look die out of his face and a certain composure return to it. He was evidently getting possession of his faculties.

"Well, Harry," I said, when I saw this, "I suppose you have had the nightmare?"

A sickly smile drew up the corners of his mouth.

"Confound you," he murmured, "I was just thinking that was the first thing you would say, and now you've said it! Good heavens!" he cried, in a louder tone, raising himself in bed and peering around the room, "I can't believe the hideous thing is gone. Are you sure it isn't in one of the corners yet? I tell you I had a narrow squeak for my life. I wouldn't care to come so near death again in a hurry. If that last kick hadn't routed you out I knew I should never have strength enough for another. Oh, what terror!" The wild look came back as he talked; he raised his hand and felt of his throat, which, from where I stood, I could see was red and swollen.

"It is hideous," said I. "You surely must know now it was no nightmare." He nodded, and gave again a quick, frightened look about. I went on:

"It—it is something that only comes in the dark. It cannot be a real thing, for it is gone with the first ray of light. It is real enough to strangle a man, though. Heavens, Harry, suppose either of us had slept here alone!" We both shuddered.

After a little while Harry quieted down, but there was very little sleep for either of us that night. We lighted everything within reach. I had a travelling lamp with me, and Harry hauled out of his bag one of those little pocket-lanterns that his sister had packed in just as he was leaving home. He said he laughed at her when she did it, but we were glad enough to see it now. We dozed and woke at intervals, always reassured to see our improvised illumination when we unclosed our eyes. Everything was still as the grave, and except for our excited nerves we might have rested in peace the whole night through. When daylight came we both gave a sigh of relief, and turning over, fell into a sleep so heavy that we never stirred until we were wakened by a tremendous thumping at the door.

"For the love of God," we heard the

landlord's voice shouting outside, "answer me, gentlemen! Answer me! Are you well? Are you safe? Speak, gentlemen! Answer me!"

Between his rough tones we heard sighs and ejaculations, the low talking of men, and the rustling of petticoats.

"Why, we're all right," I called back, and then came a chorus of congratulations and thanksgiving to all the saints from behind the door. Evidently there had been a little crowd in the hall, for we could hear them dispersing.

We talked the matter over as we were dressing. To tell the truth, I was thoroughly frightened, and felt sick of the whole business. I couldn't understand it, and the more I thought of it the more I disliked it. I didn't attempt to conceal my feelings, either. I said outright that I was scared and wanted to get away, and proposed to Harry that as soon as we had had our breakfast we should saddle our horses and ride off on the trail. From the stories we had heard since we reached the village I understood better than I had done what risk there was in such a lonely ride, but I would a great deal rather be killed by a red man in the daylight than by a monster in the dark, and I said so. But Harry took quite a different view of the matter. The effect of choking on his disposition seemed to be the reverse of depressing, and he talked in a vindictive way of our invisible assailant.

"No, you don't!" he said, when I tried to persuade him to leave. "Not much I go till I know what is the matter here. You couldn't drag me away with wild horses till I've had another wrestle with that thing."

"Mercy, Harry!" said I; "I don't see why you want another; one would have finished you quite if I hadn't been there to help you. Look at your throat now; it's purple and red; you'll have to tie a handkerchief or something round it to make yourself presentable. Whatever that awful thing was, it was stronger than you or I. What can you want to meet it again for? Prudence is the better part of valor, and I propose to quit this horrible spot before I am an hour older."

"You'll quit it alone, then," he said, sulkily, "for I'm not going with you. I'm going to stay and see it out."

I reasoned and expostulated with him, but all to no purpose. He was as obsti-

nate as a mule. I could not face the possible Indians by myself, and still less could I leave him to confront alone the dangers which I believed threatened him if he remained. I told him that if he staid, I did, and then we laid our plans. Harry had no theory at all to account for our strange experience; he simply said he would not go away until he had fathomed it. Whatever the risks might be, he wished, while wide-awake and in full possession of his faculties, to put out the light, and encounter the attack of our midnight enemy.

Through the previous day we had scarcely spoken of my adventure of the first night, having by tacit agreement alluded to it as a nightmare. Now, after what Harry had gone through, this explanation was no longer tenable. Still, we decided it would be better to say nothing of it to any one outside. When we issued from our room we found ourselves again the centre of interest for all the frequenters of the inn. Those who did not come forward to speak to us peeked at us from behind corners. A continuous procession passed through the room where we took breakfast, all on the alert for our every movement. The landlord apologized by saying we were strangers, and every one was naturally struck by our elegant appearance, and also that, owing to our habit of late rising, the simple people of the town had become somewhat anxious lest it might be an illness or other untoward occurrence which had kept us in our room so long. I imagined that he either knew something of our adventure or suspected it, from the sharpness with which he looked at us. But we gave him no satisfaction, simply assured him that we were in the habit of sleeping late, that we were charmed to inspire interest in the bosoms of the appreciative inhabitants of San Jacinto, and should always endeavor to live up to the reputation for elegance which he so kindly imputed to us.

We sketched all day. When night came and we retreated to our room, it was with the intention of thoroughly investigating the mystery. We had already taken occasion to inspect the outside of the building in the daytime. The room in which we slept was part of an old adobe structure, so far gone to ruin that this was the only portion in good preservation. The walls of this one room, however, were perfectly solid. Nowhere was there a flaw in them. There could be no

possible entrance from the outside except by the door and small grated window in the hall.

When we locked our door for the night we placed some percussion-caps in such a way that they must explode if it were opened even a crack. Then we turned our attention to the inside of the chamber. We peered into every crack and cranny of the wall, which offered plenty of opportunity for such investigation. But in spite of its rough and irregular surface it was absolutely sound; the stones were heavy and well joined; there was not an aperture anywhere big enough for a man to get his fingers through, much less his whole body. The roof was perfectly tight. Then we turned our attention to the window, and examined that with special care; for I found that with Harry, as with me, the first premonition of approaching danger had been the passing of some indistinct dark body across its misty square. But here as elsewhere it was evidently impossible that any substantial form should have found entrance. The sides of the aperture were thick and strong, and the whole opening crossed by three iron bars as big as my thumb, let into the solid stone, and clamped down so securely that there could be no chance of their ever having moved since they were put in. The intervals between them were scarcely two inches across.

We went all over the floor. It was made of rough stones set in the firm earth. Nowhere did it give a hollow sound, and its condition showed the surface could not have been disturbed for untold years. We took everything off the bed, and looked beneath it. We moved the two or three small pieces of furniture which had been set into the room since our arrival. Finally, absolutely satisfied that there was no avenue by which any human being could enter the apartment, we made our preparations for the night. Each set a chair at the head of the bed just within reach of his own hand, and on it a candle and a plentiful supply of matches. Our revolvers we laid, Harry under his pillow, and I on the chair beside me. As we calculated, the enemy could attack but one of us at a time, and as the other would be on the watch, it should be easy to overpower him from behind.

We lay down, fully dressed, on either side of the bed, and I blew out my candle.

"Are you all ready?" said Harry.

I cast a quick glance about the room, and said,

"Yes, ready."

He extinguished the remaining light. For a moment there was perfect silence. Then across the window we both saw, or rather felt than saw, through the darkness, a vague shape pass. Harry touched me with his elbow; the next second I felt my throat clutched in a grasp so fierce that all hope of freeing myself from it died within me. My one thought was that as the creature had attacked me, Harry would be able to rescue me, and as the clutch tightened I was filled with a blind fury at his delay. It was just then that a frantic plunge at my side made me aware that Harry, like myself, was fighting silently and wildly; his arms struck me as he hit out, and his kicks were as furious as his blows. I raised my hand again to tear, however vainly, at the thick fingers closed around my throat. There was but one hand there, and as my senses swam for want of breath I realized that the creature must be holding Harry and me both, one in each hand. In my struggles I had moved so far across the bed that I could not reach the matches. Yet I knew that there lay our only chance for life, and with a sudden convulsive effort I managed, not to shake off the clutch, but in spite of it to press so far to one side that I felt my hand touch the edge of the chair. It gave me new strength to know myself so near to light and life, and with a second struggle I laid my hand upon the matches, raised and struck them against the side of the bed. I had never known such happiness before—I never shall again—as shot through my heart when my blurred eyes saw the first flicker of the tiny blue flame. The next instant, as the yellow blaze flared up, the awful constriction was gone from my windpipe. For a second I lay still, unable to do more than draw a faint and painful breath, then terror lest the tiny sticks should burn out and leave me in darkness nerved my fainting will. I put out my other hand, gathered more matches, kindled them at the first, and holding the bunch like a tiny torch I leaned over and lighted the candle. Exhausted by the effort, I fell back fainting on the pillow.

When I came to, the candle was burning brightly. I opened my eyes with a sigh to drink in the luxury of the light, then closed them again in utter weariness,

and lay without a thought, contented in the blissful consciousness that I was alive and safe. I must have remained so for some time, when there suddenly went through my half-torpid brain a memory of Harry. I had not felt him move, and the thought alarmed me so that I sat up in bed, as if roused by an electric shock, and bent over him. His eyes were staring wide, but he lay motionless, and made no response when I called him by name. I laid my hand on his forehead. It was warm. So was his hand, though it dropped nervelessly from mine when I left hold of it. I fancied I could detect a faint breath drawn at long intervals, and a slight, but very slight, pulsation of the heart. There was evidently not a moment to be lost. I jumped from the bed, though I found I was so bruised and sore with struggling that every movement brought sharp pain. I ran to the door, and in spite of the unreasonable horror which attacked me of letting in the darkness, I flung it open and shouted with all my might for help. A few seconds of such clamor and I heard answering voices; a moment more, and it seemed as if people by the hundred, all bearing lamps, candles, lanterns, began to stream along the corridor. They flocked into the room, and it scarcely needed my few hasty words to set them to work with Harry. Almost before I had spoken they had him stripped, and three or four active Mexicans were rubbing and kneading him like so many furies. The women flew for hot water and brandy. In a few moments a long shuddering sigh told that his vital forces were returning, and in a little more I had what was to me the ineffable satisfaction of seeing his eyelids close, and shut out the look of horror which had seemed stamped upon the eyeballs beneath them.

Of course we moved Harry out of that room immediately, but it took weeks of the most careful nursing before he could leave San Jacinto. During all that time, as you may well believe, I spent every moment I could spare from him in trying to fathom the causes of our horrible experience. But the more I searched the more inexplicable the whole affair became. At first I very naturally suspected that it was part of some scheme for robbery or murder on the part of the people of the inn, but I soon became convinced that they were perfectly innocent. There was no mistaking the sincerity of

their concern for what had happened, nor the simple friendliness with which they helped to care for Harry. They were coarse and superstitious people, but not criminal, and not unkindly. I detected, however, a certain shade of self-reproach, if not remorse, in their manner, and when I had probed this to the bottom I had found the only explanation for the whole affair which I ever reached. It was so utterly unreasonable that I can only give it to you and leave you to make what you can of it.

When we carried Harry to the miserable little adobe hut at the other end of the street, which was hastily abandoned for his use, I heard an uproar behind us in the direction of the inn, to which at the time I paid no attention. And during that afternoon, in the intervals between Harry's repeated fainting attacks, I heard shouts, mixed with hollow crashing sounds, for which I did not even try to account. But when in the course of a few days I permitted myself a short walk, I strolled in the direction of the inn, and there found that the ruinous structure in which we had lodged had been torn down. The big stones lay scattered in every direction, but not one remained on top of another. I asked the landlord what it meant.

"Ah, señor," said he, "it was the people that did it. They would not let the old building stand another hour. And perhaps they were right, though the loss is mine. I am happier myself now that it is down. Who knows? Some time in the future I might have been tempted again by greed to let some luckless traveller have that room. The señor knows our people are very superstitious, and make more of such things than those in the great world. I wished to be wiser than my neighbors—the saints pardon me! When the traveller was found dead there fifteen years ago I made sure he had died of some sudden illness; and as for the two who died there in my father's time, and the others before that, I forced myself to disbelieve in them. But the señor's story of what happened the other night has taught me better. The place was accursed. It is well that it has been destroyed."

I asked him what he meant by calling it accursed, and he told me a long story of the old house, in which we had occupied the only habitable chamber. The build-

ing was over a hundred years old, and had been occupied for many years as an inn, whose visitors were the Indians and Mexicans at their seasons of festival, and such few travellers as made their way into that distant region. Some seventy-five years before it had been in the possession of a man of enormous strength and evil disposition, under whose rule the place gained a bad reputation exactly in proportion as the landlord increased in wealth. Two or three travellers who were known to have money about them were never seen again after entering the doors; the landlord maintained that each of them had continued his journey the next day, starting before dawn, and there was no one to gainsay him. Others were found dead in bed with black marks on their throats, but beyond these there was nothing to throw suspicion on any one person, and the terror with which the brutal innkeeper inspired his neighbors was sufficient to crush out inquiry. At last, however, the landlord was caught in the act. An American engineer, carrying a large sum of money, had passed through the town, and taken shelter at the inn for the night. He made no secret of the money about him, perhaps because, being a very large and strong man and well armed, he had entire confidence in his ability to keep his own. But that night some wretched gringos, who were sleeping on the floor of the kitchen, heard a shout for help. Too timid to answer the call themselves, they ran for aid, and presently, with the assistance of half a dozen others, burst in the door of the man's room. They found the man dead, and the landlord kneeling on the bed, with his knotted fingers still twisted round the throat of his victim. Before he could stir, while he was still blinking at the sudden light from the broken door, he was shot dead by another American, a miserable tramp, half gambler and half drunkard, who had joined in breaking open the door. The avenger, much lauded by the populace, had gone on his way the same day. The two bodies had been buried side by side outside the town. There was now no question as to the cause of the previous deaths and disappearances.

But the room in which such ghastly crimes had been committed had ever since been regarded with horror by the natives. According to their belief, the man who died in the commission of such a deed be-

came an evil spirit, condemned to exist in darkness, and to repeat forever the awful crime in which his last moments had been spent. For years the chamber stood unoccupied; but when, after the lapse of a long time, stress of company made it necessary to use it, a strange confirmation of their faith was given to the superstitious.

The solitary occupant, who had retired the night before apparently in good health, was found dead in bed the next morning. There were not wanting those who affirmed that on his throat were the purple marks which testified to the presence of the midnight strangler. However that may have been, within the next thirty years three more deaths occurred in the same mysterious manner, and at the time of the last so great was the popular horror that not only was the room itself condemned as "accursed," but the whole building, now very ruinous, was abandoned, and a new one erected nearer the street. It was many years since the old room had been occupied when we took possession of it, and the temptation to the landlord to keep beneath his roof the two Americans, who to his eyes were simply mines of future wealth, had proved too strong to be overcome. He had salved his conscience by arguing that the tales about the room were a parcel of foolish superstitions not worthy the notice of any man of the world, and, in addition, that we were safe at any rate, since the evil spirit, if it still haunted those walls, could attack only in the darkness, while we were not only provided with abundant means of illumination, but had had clearly impressed upon us the importance of using them.

And now you know what has really been the matter with Harry Felters. He has never fully recovered since that night. It took me a year or two to get over the shock, but he never did. Whether there was some actual physical injury done to him, or whether the fright made too deep an impression on his nerves ever to be effaced, I cannot tell you. But from that time to this he has remained ailing and good for nothing, though most of the time he is reasonable and composed. He is subject, though, to occasional violent attacks of terror. But these come on him only in the dark, and if you have ever spent any time with him you will remember with what elaborate precautions he surrounds himself against being left even for a moment without light. He is a wreck.